THE PRIORITY OF P

by

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For the last hundred years it has been the received wisdom in Old Testament scholarship that P is the latest of the pentateuchal sources or redactional layers. Yet before Wellhausen1 established this as the consensus view, it was generally held that P was one of the oldest sources, the so-called Grundschrift, e.g. de Wette, Hupfeld.2 Dillmann3 continued to maintain the priority of P even after Wellhausen had written. But since Dillmann few scholars4 of stature have maintained the priority of P. Yet in other areas the Wellhausenian consensus has been fiercely attacked. The analysis into sources has been challenged, so that many doubt the existence of an independent E source. The date of J has been questioned: as many now argue for a sixth-century J as for a tenth-century J. But the relative order of J and P has gone unquestioned: that J was written before P is still generally accepted.5 The modern debate is only about how much earlier J is than P, not whether J is earlier.

1 J. Wellhausen, Geschichte Israels I (Berlin, 1878).
2 W.M.L. de Wette, Beiträge zur Einleitung in das Alte Testament (Halle, 1806-7); H. Hupfeld, Die Quellen der Genesis und die Art ihrer Zusammensetzung von neuem untersucht (Berlin, 1853).
4 Two recent exceptions are J.L. Ska, “El relato del diluvio: un relato sacerdotal y algunos fragmentos redaccionales posteriores”, Estudios Bíblicos 52 (1994), pp. 37-62, who confines his discussion to the flood story and argues that the J elements are secondary. He does not think this is true elsewhere in Genesis. J. Blenkinsopp, The Pentateuch. An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible (London, 1992), pp. 61-97, suggests that at many points in Genesis material traditionally ascribed to P antedates so-called J material (e.g. “the Priestly strand (P) is basic . . . It has been filled out at several points with narrative expansions—corresponding to the J of the documentary hypothesis” [p. 93]). However Blenkinsopp relies too much on vocabulary to establish relative dates, which is a slippery argument.
5 Representative of this school of thought are: J. Van Seters, Abraham in History and Tradition (New Haven, 1975); E. Blum, Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1984); C. Levin, Der Jahwist (Göttingen, 1993).
Here I propose to re-examine this axiom of pentateuchal criticism, at least as it applies to the book of Genesis. The issues raised by the cultic laws in P are of quite a different order and have been discussed at length elsewhere. However I do not propose to treat these questions historically, simply from a literary/redactional standpoint. I am not trying to determine the absolute dates of the J and P material, just their relative ages. I shall look at the P passages in Genesis and attempt to discover how they relate to the nearby J passages. It is obvious that as the texts stand at present P passages comment on and illuminate J passages and *vice versa*. But can one say which was written first? Are the P passages a commentary on the J material or are the J passages expansions of the P material?

The P material in Genesis covers a variety of genres. There are genealogies (chs. v, xi), a table of nations (ch. x), straight narrative (ch. xxiii), an extended promise (ch. xvii), a semi-poetic creation account (i 1-ii 3), sundry chronological notes (e.g. xvi 3, 15-16), and headings to sections (e.g. vi 9).

Usually the P material appears quite distinct within Genesis: genealogies for example interrupt the ongoing story line. But in two or three instances P and J are held to be interwoven, in the flood story (chs. vi-ix), in the table of nations (ch. x) and possibly in ch. xxxiv as well. These supposedly composite passages are the most difficult to evaluate source critically, so I shall begin by examining those passages where the P material is most distinct before looking at the more complex sections.

### Genealogies

Within Genesis the genealogies stand out as distinctive blocks, particularly v 1-32 and xi 10-26. They are characterised by exact repetition of standard formulae. “When A had lived x years, he became the father of B. A lived after the birth of B y years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of A were x + y years and he died”. This recurs six times in this exact form in vv. 6-8, 9-11, 12-14,

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7 Within the space of an article it is not possible to deal with every passage. For further discussion see my commentaries *Genesis 1-15* (Waco, 1987) and *Genesis 16-50* (Dallas, 1994) usually under the heading “Form, Structure, Setting”.